

## Academic advising in the context of modernisation of higher education of Kazakhstan

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### Suggested Citation:

Abdykhalykova, Z. & Shalgynbaeva, K. (2018). Academic advising in the context of modernisation of higher education of Kazakhstan. *Contemporary Educational Researches Journal*. 8(3), 77–82.

Received from July 10, 2017; revised from December 05, 2017; accepted from June, 27, 2018.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Deniz Ozcan, Near East University, Cyprus.

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### Abstract

The need for modernisation of higher education is determined by the objectives set out in the concept of modernisation of Kazakhstan education to 2020, inner laws of development of higher education and future development needs of the individual, society and the state. The leading idea of modernization of Kazakhstan education is the transition from knowledge-to competence-based education. Beginning in 2001, Kazakhstan universities established the credit system as an experiment based on the European Bologna process. The credit system gives Kazakhstan students the opportunity to build a route of personal and career development, to take an active position with regard to their future, which will further contribute to their learning throughout the life. Based on these changes, academic advising and student support of students are new phenomena in Kazakh higher education. This paper describes the implementation and realisation of academic advising of students in the context of modernisation of higher education of Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** Higher education in Kazakhstan, student academic support, academic advising.

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## 1. Introduction

Academic advising is becoming more relevant at the present period due to the changes in the structure and content of higher education in Kazakhstan and higher requirements for the preparation of future specialists. The need for higher education modernisation is determined by the objectives set out in the concept of Kazakhstan education modernisation to 2020, internal regulations of higher education development and the needs of the individual, society and the state in the future. The leading idea of modernisation of Kazakhstan education is the transition from knowledge-based education to competence-based education. In 2001, Kazakhstan universities started introducing the credit system as an experiment based on the European Bologna process (Kulekeev, Gamarnik & Abdrasilova, 2004; State Education Law of RK, 2007).

The credit system gives Kazakhstan students the opportunity to build an individual trajectory of personal and career development, to take an active part in shaping their own future, which will further contribute to their learning throughout the life. However, as many Kazakhstan researchers have indicated, students are often not prepared to determine their educational needs, opportunities or plan a learning trajectory to achieve their goals (Asanov, Kaldiyarov & Minazheva, 2010). Kazakh students, especially first-year students, do not fully understand what the credit system means and how to study at the university within this new system since they have just gone out of a secondary school system with different study rules and, often, different expectations of academic rigor. Unfortunately, according to the student survey conducted in 2011, 35–42% of Kazakh students were unfamiliar with characteristics of learning within the credit system until the end of study at the University (Levshina, 2011). In order to bridge this gap, in 2010 the Kazakhstan universities started to formally implement an academic advisor program.

## 2. Academic advising as an effective institutional strategy

According to Kazakh higher education reforms, academic advising is provided by a faculty member, who serves as a student's mentor from the relevant specialty, assists in the selection of learning trajectory and development of educational programs in the period of study (the rules of the organisation credit system in RK, 2011). In a short time, Kazakhstan universities have created rights and obligations of advisors, but many of them are not specially for this work and provide their support for students without any formal framework such as a university academic advising handbook or guide. Academic advisors work for promoting students' growth, learning and success. Academic advising also helps students plan an educational program that matches their educational and vocational goals.

Service advisors were needed for establishing communication between students and teachers in order to create favorable conditions for quality education. In Kazakhstan universities, formal faculty advising is usually the responsibility of course coordinators and program managers. Advisor usually works with a group of 15–25 students. The purposes of academic advising are multiple and yet unique to each student, each advisor and to the institution tool that enables students to find meaning and a pathway for their academic pursuits (Yaduf, 2003).

Kazakhstan universities put high demands on the activities of the academic advisor. In the work, the adviser is guided by:

- the requirements of the Education Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan;
- regulations on education, the Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan and the State educational standards of the Republic of Kazakhstan, used in the activity of the university;
- the University Charter;
- policies and objectives of the quality of the university;
- Guidance on Quality of the University;

- the requirements of the quality management system;
- internal procedures, orders and directives of the university.

The main functions of a faculty advisor include the following: assisting students in identifying individual educational trajectory of learning and development of educational programs, orientation and adaptation to the educational process within the entire university, in shaping the future of a professional orientation of students. Adviser introduces the student with the features the academic life of the university, working content of the curriculum, the requirements for obtaining a degree, the opportunity to choose a specialty and adviser also helps to choose the educational path in accordance with the inclinations, abilities, interests and goals of the student.

According to the work of The Global Community for Academic Advising, advisors are required to have a broad range of skills, knowledge, abilities and values. Educational theory, psychological theory, sociology theory, knowledge of cultural studies and other disciplines (NACADA, 2006) are on the short list of what an advisor needs to know.

The situation regarding academic advising in Kazakhstan is quite different from that in the USA, where advising is a paraprofessional staff role with trained personnel. In general, there is no Kazakhstan tradition of specialist advising as in the USA, nor is there a tradition of personal tutors as there is in Britain (British Council, 2007). Academic advisor activities in the context of the Kazakh higher education does not have a systemic character, the basic methods of work of academic advisor in higher education are not defined yet.

Introduction of international experience in the implementation of the new type of academic support can lead to poorly organised training based on confusing methodology. Borrowing educational policies from both US and European models while sustaining many aspects of Soviet universities, post-secondary student support services in Central Asia is challenging due to complicated issues of language (Russian is still the standard language of instruction although many students are educated in their national language), lack of experience with Western pedagogical models, lack of knowledge about choosing courses under a credit system, as well as the usual challenges of socialising new students into their collegiate experience.

### **3. The role of advising**

Student satisfaction is growing in importance in higher education as institutions look for ways to meet the demands of stakeholders and legislators, provide evidence of institutional effectiveness and enhance students' learning environments (Schreiner, 2009). The role of academic advising is coming to the front of discussion around student success including student engagement and satisfaction, persistence, time to degree and retention. A book entitled *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* opens a chapter with the following statement, 'Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of successful college experience' (Light, 2001, p. 81).

Research shows 'academic advising can play a role in students' decisions to persist and in their changes to graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 404). Strong academic advising is essential for students' success and retention (Gordon, 2008). Some see advising as the primary transition and affiliation linkage outside the classroom for students to connect with the institution (Frost, 1991). According to the Higher Education Report entitled *Piecing Together the Student Puzzle* (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007), academic advising in various contexts such as first-year experience, orientation, graduation, planning and student success, is mentioned 31 times in manuscript. The study posits that academic advising aids in student development, independent thinking and problem-solving, and that academic advising teaches students how to plot a route through the institution and its culture. In addition, it puts forward that academic advisors need to be accessible to

students and they need to know how to respond to individual student needs educationally and otherwise (Kuh et al. 2007).

Crockett (1985) explained that academic advising evolved from a simple perfunctory activity where advisors prescribed required courses, to a more comprehensive and purposeful activity that emphasised student development. O'Banion (1972) was the original theorist who made this distinction between prescriptive and developmental advising. Five steps of O'Banion's model were listed as: 1) exploration of life goals, 2) exploration of career goals, 3) selection of a major or program of study, 4) selection of courses and 5) scheduling of courses.

The final role of the academic advisor is that of a personal mentor. This involves establishing and sustaining rapport and trust while focusing on the student's individual needs and personal growth requirements (Wade & Yoder, 1995). Frost (2000) asserted that the recognition of the student's individuality makes this relationship responsive to pluralism through the encouragement of students to explore their differences as positive factors. Fiddler and Alicea (1996) concurred and stated that the abilities to communicate and counsel, rest on respect for the individuality of each learner and the goal of establishing and sustaining rapport and trust with a richly diverse population of students. The role of mentor involves a commitment of time and a demonstration of a caring attitude towards the student (Beasley-Fielstein, 1986).

Academic advising is an integral part of each student's educational experience at the Kazakhstan universities. Advisors assist students in developing an academic and career plan, in obtaining support from other offices of the University. This includes informing students about possible scholarships, program of academic mobility. They also encourage students to enrich their experiences by becoming involved on campus via social, political, academic, cultural, sport student organisations and activities.

#### **4. Student advising needs**

Student advising needs can be grouped into two primary subgroups. These subgroups include situational characteristics and innate characteristics. Both subgroups are important and must be recognised. Situational student advising needs are influenced by student age, enrollment patterns, place of residence, gender, disabilities and learning styles. The educational experiences of students prior to enrollment also play a role in what students need from advisors (Gordon, 2008). In addition to these and changing student demographics, innate student advising needs are influenced by differing attitudes and values, family issues, mental health, physical health, academic preparation, academic misconduct and accessing, affording and financing education (Gordon, 2008).

In the study, we conducted a survey with first-year students of the Eurasian National University where four blocks of problems faced by students in the learning process at the university were identified.

1. Adaptation at the University (lack of knowledge about the University: the structure of the University, the educational process at the university, educational environment at the university).
2. Self-organisation in the educational process (issues related to the organisation of time, lack of readiness to solve the problems in the educational process of the university)
3. Self-study at university (problems associated with the implementation of various types of independent work)
4. The choice of the educational process at the University (problems with planning individual educational trajectory, shaping one's professional life and making plans, setting goals, strategies, implementing choices and reflecting on the experience).

Since academic advising is a new phenomenon in higher education of Kazakhstan that comes with the reform of universities, many educators who should function as faculty advisors, had problems due to the absence of methodological and theoretical training.

Considering the above-mentioned problems of students, many universities of Kazakhstan, including the Eurasian National University conducted refresher courses for faculty advisors. Within the framework of our research for the theoretical training of the faculty advisors, we developed a modular training program for faculty adviser 'Academic advising of university students'.

The program of training advisors included the following components: individual-oriented educational process at the university, a place of an academic advisor in higher education, academic counseling model in universities, academic advising as an essential part of academic support to students and academic problems of students.

Within this course the program educators, who are to perform the functions of an academic advisor get more information about the opportunities provided at the university (infrastructure of the University, university services, individual-oriented educational process at the university), get acquainted with the activities of the academic advisor (academic counseling, models, techniques, methods of interaction between students and a faculty advisor). Furthermore, the participants of the training program practice solving the problems applying efficient methods and techniques of academic advising for university students (Jigsaw, 'Focusing four', 'Card Sorting', 'Continuum', 'Carousel Brainstorming'), which are used to solve the problems of students at different year of study in the design and implementation of individual educational trajectory. During modular program through the joint work of educators, the following work was done: clarifying the purpose of academic advising of the university, clarifying the content of academic advising, making recommendations to the academic advisors.

At the end of training course, which was organised as part of our study, we can conclude that the course has helped the academic advisers to cover the main areas of their professional activities, solve the problems of students in selecting and implementing their individual educational trajectory, organise the technology interaction with the students.

In addition, participants of the seminar have given the following recommendations for improving the effectiveness of faculty advisors:

- systematic training of faculty advisors at the university that will contribute to their professional development;
- development of an educational and methodological handbook for a faculty advisor with students of different levels of training: Bachelor's, Master's, Doctorate;
- preparing professional academic advisors at the higher educational institutions.

## 5. Conclusion

Academic advising as a new form of academic support to students in the context of higher education in Kazakhstan will satisfy the needs and meet the conditions of transition to individualisation of the learning process and variability of educational programs. Still, most Kazakhstan institutions faculty advisers have had very little formal advising training and have gained their skills by the learn-as-you-go method and one-on-one observations with more seasoned faculty colleagues.

Proceeding from the aforesaid regarding academic advising in Kazakhstan, we conclude that Kazakhstani colleges and universities should offer more advising and support services to their students, which are currently found in only a few major universities. The government should financially support the development of these services.

Academic advising can be performed by both faculty members and by student affairs professionals in special academic support centers similar to those at the US universities. Faculty can help students interpret their disciplines and explain the institution's policies and procedures that govern degree requirements. Academic support centers can offer first-year students an extended academic orientation to integrate entering students into the institutional environment. This initiative is of vital

importance to students, especially today when academies and all its participants are transiting to the unfamiliar three-level educational system, establishing new undergraduate curriculum, integrating the credit system and reforming other aspects of higher education.

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